

**To Relegate The Fringes of Marginalized Women in The
Social Milieu: A Comparative Study of R.K.Narayan's The
Dark Room and Anita Nair's Mistress**

S.Suganya

Research Scholar

Bharathiar University

Coimbatore

Abstract

In the present-day world the suppressed people come forward from their marginalized position and try to voice out their concerns. This in turn has a remarkable strength on the writings of this age. The consciousness of the writings has also become multi-dimensional where a character is supposed and is offered with all the follies as well as noble qualities. A close look at the contemporary literary development expose the reality that the spectator's point of view is getting old-fashioned, and writings about marginal people remain in the denotative level whereas the writings by the suppressed people replicate the first-hand experience that becomes a work of fine art, for an effort of art should be exact to life and close to life. Hence, the challenge before the contemporary writer is to engrave the unwritten through denaturalizing the natural, for in the traditional set up natural is not natural but it is the formed event as culture or tradition. The attempt of women novelists to project woman as the central figure in presenting the predicament of women has been very successful and effective and the emotional world of the woman is discovered and analysed with great insight by them. The women writers break the leash of social norms and do not confine themselves to the boundaries of women. The subaltern groups are actually oppressed most in the modern transition of India and the oppression is legitimized by the democratic system. The project figures out the significance of the studies on the indigenous tradition, which actually are quite oppressive and hostile to certain groups and thus incompatible with the modernity, including the democratic system of which they are proud. R.K. Narayan represents the subaltern groups and why the subaltern groups are speechless and nearly invisible

in most of his writing and Anita Nair's female characters are bold and confident enough to fulfill their desires by going against the society.

Novelists since all over the world have started questioning the so-called traditionally holistic customs of life through their works of art. Both men and women writers not only present the vindictive authority of the dominant set-up that proceeds upon their folk but also demands the need to redraft the past which ignored their existence. The female protagonists of the writers of this century are the real women who realize their status in the patriarchal society. R.K.Narayan the first Indian writer in English acquired a reputation among the native as well as from the readers through his writings about the imaginary town Malgudi. Among all his works *The Dark Room* (1938) is written in an unsophisticated manner in order to encompass a world of human emotions. Narayan generally writes on the lives of the people of Malgudi, their anticipation, and worries, triumphs and disappointments. His novels emanate optimism; however *The Dark Room* is an exception to this fact. His third novel, *The Dark Room*, published in 1938 began to handle the issue of subaltern groups. He describes the miserable conditions and the atrocious oppressions imposed upon women. They are deprived of subjectivity and have no say in the family.

The nature of interaction between the two principal characters prefigures the nature of action during the whole narrative extent of the novel. The nature of action revealed in the first paragraph of the novel is approved again in the successive lines

I don't know when I shall have a little decent food to eat. I slave all day in the office for this mouthful. No lack of expenses money for this and no money for that. If the cook can't cook properly, do the work yourself. What have you to do better than that? (Narayan *The Dark Room*: 2)

Ramani's outburst makes the dominance clear and Savitri's subordination to masculine authority sets the nodes and antinodes of the tension that shapes the fiction. Ramani is delineated with sudden unpredictable outburst but Savitri endures the rage with convention submission of an Indian woman. *The Dark Room* deals with the matriarchal life of Savitri, a typical Indian housewife whom her husband Ramani, being a conceited and insensate man ill-treats her in very fine ways. Narayan's novels have many a female character but most of them are traditional Indian women who live in a life within the confines of their home. The character of Savitri in the

first half of the story is an apt follower of the pativrata concept. Savitri, as the name suggests, is a loyal, biddable housewife who has never had the freedom to edify herself. In a sternly patriarchal society, her submissive behaviour reasonably as expected makes her the sufferer of her husband, Ramani's varying whims, fancies, insults and criticisms. So she sheds all her tears in the store room which is dark and it is the only place where they can seek shelter when ill-treated and also it appears like a prison for her. In the fiction, the dark room is not only a place for the withdrawal of the woman when she is harmed by her husband, but also the dark room here acts as a metaphor which unveils the miserable conditions of women and the oppressions imposed upon them by men. They are often victims within a marriage. This is the first book that Narayan throws spotlights upon women's issues. Right from the beginning of the novel we can comprehend the attitude of Ramani towards his wife.

The pressure of married life of a woman is brought out well by the author. This novel raises a lot of disturbing questions regarding the institution of marriage. It is possibly one of the earliest books upon the question of woman's rights, gender equality etc. It is the only book published around forty years back when these issues were not even considered important. This book is footing evidence to anticipation and social vision of the author. The question as to whether the traits of the individuals in the marriage should be inundated in the larger concern of the marriage is one, which has been moderately answered. According to Narayan, a woman has to discharge the duties of a wife and a mother for her role in life to be self-fulfilling because he firmly believes in the old school of thought. Through his character Savitri he cannot withstand with, this belief of his, he is reasonably callous on the insensitiveness of the husband who treats his wife with indifference and contempt. After coming from his office, Ramani came very quickly towards the dining hall and said to Savitri,

"Hope you have finished your dinner". "Not yet". "What a dutiful wife! would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books. (Narayan *The Dark Room*: 11)

It is also remarkable that the graveness of Ramani is not limited to Savitri. Narayan defined him with natural egotism and short-temperedness. The protagonist somehow manages to endure within the four walls of her home until the day her husband starts to spend his nights with Shanta Bai. Shanta Bai, an attractive, rebellious and daunting woman is employed by Ramani as

an insurance probationer in his company. Being the only woman employee of Ramani's company, her character would have been quite pleasing if only she had proved herself at job and not made it her business to enmesh Ramani in her blooming charms. Savitri confines herself to a dark room and tries various other methods to win her husband from the hands of Shanta Bai, but Ramani pays no attention to Savitri. It is quite ironical that Savitri's submission seeks apt revelation in a comment passed by her autocratic husband. The budding rupture between Ramani and Savitri leads to revolt on the part of Savitri:

"Don't touch me!" she cried, moving away from him. "You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin, I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch". He clenched his teeth and raised his hands. She said, "All right, strike me. I am not afraid". He lowered his hands and said, "Woman, get away now". (Narayan *The Dark Room*: 87)

Ramani's attitude is an unreservedly self centered and self pleasure-seeking man and this attitude of Ramani compels revolt in Savitri that initiates with escape from her monstrous husband. She walked all the way to the end of the town and reached the river. Sarayu was flowing in the dark with passive saunter. Savitri's exile reminds us of many mythological characters who suffered banishment. The two leading female characters, Sita and Shakuntala in Indian mythology provoke a close association with Savitri. It is, conversely, notable that Savitri is closer to Sita than Shakuntala. The use of Sita and Shakuntala myth is an important aspect of the narrative.

Frustrated with her dependent life, Savitri attempts suicide but is saved. Though 'a part of her is dead', for having a conventional crush from her fate, she puts a full stop to be the submissive 'Savitri' that she used to be. The novel though over forty years old it deals with issues which are contemporary and the reader will find it to be very relevant to this age. The scenes of marital disagreement have been repeated over thousands of homes and will continue to do so. In The modern age where one finds a lot of marriage's coming apart, the messages the novel tries to convey are educative and hopefully readers may imbibe some of them. The novel is set in a South Indian milieu and Narayanan manages to recreate the scenes of everyday life successfully.

Savitri, like Sita is dutiful and committed but unlike Sita, her exile is not an act of obedience to her husband but it is a revolt against male chauvinism. She is saved and she stayed

in a temple. Savitri's stay at the temple accounts for the recognition, which has been authorized through the pastime of the image of the dark room. The symbol of the river, Sarayu makes us identify Savitri with Sita, but the symbol of the temple and the dark room with the stench of flaming oil and smoke pressurizes realization on her part. There is recurring sideline of the image of the dark room, which, in the initial part of the novel is applied with much simpler meaning but now in the last expression of the narrative it is used with deeper stratum of paradox. She rejects fright when she consents to live in the dark lonely shade. Savitri's stay in the dark room now motivates longing and wistfulness. The revolution in her dies. The woman is reborn. Fear returned. The realization of Savitri, Narayan celebrates the festivity of her return by recreating the symbols of dialogues between Ramani who doesn't question anything about his wife's absence in the house. The novel ends with a pathetic note on the Savitri's part which culminates the realization. Savitri's realization confirms the cyclic reversal of the situation that Savitri in the beginning of the novel is same as Savitri in the last page but with an identity of her own. Narayan's ideas regarding Woman's emancipation, marriage run through the entire book invisibly but his treatment of Savitri's character is sympathetic. The book is definitely worth a read but let readers be forewarned, this book will raise a lot of disturbing questions which will haunt the readers for some time to come. Readers familiar with Narayan will see a new facet of the man, this book should be read for that reason alone. As to his contradictory attitudes toward modernity and tradition, we should not forget that at the first place he is a traditionalist. He seems, in some aspects, share the views of the nationalist elites, that is, India's tradition is the symbol of Indianness which can never be eliminated. On the other hand, he learns from the reality that the suppression upon women is not really from the western culture, but really from the oppressive factors of their own tradition. So in his fictions we can obviously notice that his New Women are the groups who have the courage to show contempt to their own tradition and pick up the new life, the western lifestyle. In this sense, western culture, different from postcolonial critic, is something that empowers women.

Anita Nair is a contemporary Indo-English novelist who has presented the plight of Indian women, who are fluctuating between traditional and modern roles. Anita Nair's works are based on purely Indian background. She has demonstrated the subordinate position of women in

the orthodox tradition-bound Indian society. These existing norms axe the rights of women and sideline their existence as human beings. She has taken up the issues of gender discrimination and social conditioning of women, husband– wife relationship: the assailant and the suppressed, and the sexual exploitation of women within and outside the marital frame. Marriage is set as an ultimate goal for girls. Women have to mould and transform themselves to suit the interests of their male counterparts and in this process suppress their self-identity.

Radha in *Mistress* is a character whose status made her marry below her standards, thus ruining her father's expectations for her to make a brilliant marriage into a family that will match them in status and wealth (Nair, *Mistress*: 119).

Finding out about her affair, her father finds her immediately a husband, so that she is not able to make further damage to his social status. When the question of marriage arises, Radha plays a passive role in the match making. Her father finds a suitable husband and arranges the marriage. This is the traditional marriage procedure that is described in most cases in the novel. While the bridegroom to be is usually asked his opinion on the chosen bride, as is the case of the Radha who raised no objections to sharing her life with a total stranger and also there is no such possibility applies to her. Like all intelligent and independent women, Radha too was not satisfied with her married life and her hopelessness is worsened by the actions of an anxious, over protective husband. There is no difference in this aspect in the novels when it comes to the family's status. The same future of being married to a stranger without their consent would apply also for all religion. Here again the notion of woman as an object who has no say in the decision about her future emerges and is confirmed by the tradition of arranging marriages.

On the other hand, Radha's affair with a married man, even though putting her father's good name in trouble, is not punished as severely. She is forced to marry Shyam after her father has heard moderately disconcerting things as not to cause any more damage. The depiction of their wedding night reveals another important, even though not at all surprising, finding, which is that there are binary standards when it comes to what is expected from men and women. When Radha tells her bridegroom that she is not a virgin, he realises the consequence of her affirmation. When he admits to having slept with other women, none of them finds it a serious confession. While a male is never judged by his affairs to women, a woman's bad reputation is considered a hassle for the whole family.

The preference of marriage is the only option for any respectable woman. Not getting married was practically not an option at all, as the position of an unmarried woman was incomparably less favourable. An unmarried woman's destiny was to stay for the rest of her life in her father's home, taking her part in the life the family lives without any expectation for her future. There are no rights she can claim in return for her duties. Such is the case of Radha, for whom marriage was the only way to get better her family's good name after her affair, as well as the only way to avoid becoming a spinster that nobody would ever want to socialize with because of her damaged character. She just weighed the odds and accepted.

In spite of marriage being the main goal a young woman has in her life as well as one of her father's main life goals, rather than changing it her life it usually only brings new expectations she is supposed to perform. Through marriage, women cease to be their fathers' property and become the property of their husbands. No longer do they need to worry about meeting the requirements for brides. Now they have to face prospect held by their husbands and their families. They are supposed to take care of their new homes and of their husbands and above all offers them children as soon as possible. A marriage only becomes entirely satisfactory when the wife gives birth to a baby, preferably a son, thus increasing her husband's respectability in the society. In some cases, giving birth to a son can be the only expectation the wife has to face. Once fulfilling it, her marital duties are over.

That it was only after the son's and not the daughter's birth is, moreover, a typical trait for in the patriarchal society. The expectation of a son is always intimated by the context, though never explicit. On the contrary, when mentioning the duties a wife has, she is usually assured that the sex of the child is not an important issue, as long as there is a child in the marriage. Having a child is such a mechanical premise that anybody, it seems, is entitled to inquire about it.

"Isn't it time you had a child?" demands Rani Oppol when Radha and Shyam are still childless in their second year of marriage (Nair, *Mistress*: 114).

It is never considered to be the couple's choice whether or not they want to have children. Just like a marriage is the only credible option for a respectable single girl, having a child (or several) is the only possible future for a married wife, unless she is barren. Yet still, being barren is considered ill luck and often the wife's critical defect. There are many prejudices for women

without a child must face. Radha is dejected to visit a social event on the grounds of being childless in spite of her being married as long as two years:

You know how people are; they think a married woman who hasn't had children for so long is a *macchi*. They wouldn't like it. It is inauspicious to have a barren woman at such functions... the evil eye, etc. (Nair, *Mistress*: 114).

In the wife-husband relationship, a child is also a proof of the wife's devotion. A child is it may seem the husband's legal assert. By giving a child to the man, the wife proves her loyalty to the husband, or even her affection to him. This holds true not only in arranged marriages, but also in love marriages. There are however, a number of other necessities besides giving the husband a baby that a woman has to meet in order to be considered a good wife. Most of them similar to those she had to meet as a daughter. A good wife should in addition cultivate her good qualities, while disposing of her vices. As for her appearance, she is expected to keep her good looks for her husband, possibly also to impress his friends. It is expected that she will be loyal and obedient to her husband, always at his disposal. Furthermore, even now as a married woman she has to ensure that her reputation, as well as that of her husband and family, remains together. To meet this constraint she has to manage the family so that it is a true home for the husband and act properly in society, keeping in mind that any possible small lapse on her side can affect his prestige.

In the case of a woman, it is the external force that dictates her life and her actions. She is not the decision-maker in matters concerning her and therefore, not liable for the consequences. The world, the masculine society, is hence accountable for her condition and any amount of complaints and grumbles are not able to reach the other end and her voices simply goes unheard. This male world is embodied in woman's husband who is in charge of her, and by default responsible for her miseries. Within marriage, women reconcile in varied ways with the authority structure in the husband's family, invisibilizing the gender inequalities in marriage structure. Domestic violence, brutality of the husband is kept it behind the doors of their flats and bungalows. Domestic violence was reported by women in all castes and working class, with few also justifying wives beating as a disciplinary measure. Among upper castes, domestic violence was recognized as valid reason for separation. Freedom from domestic violence was considered

as a middle class privilege and hence their not awareness among the working class was even lower. More often, they sought help of neighbourhood groups.

The reason for Radha's aversion towards Shyam is the ill-treatment and never allow her to do anything on her own. When she suggested him that she would like to start a business on her own, he yelled to her that he has a status in the society and she has to behave as a wife to him and not to spoil his status in the society. She raised her voice and said that he behaves as if he was superior to her but actually all are human beings no one is superior or inferior in this society. Behind this incident she was very angry and went into her room. As a rebel she started to revolt to her husband but he doesn't care with her behaviour.

He likes her extremely and he doesn't react in a way that they are equal and partners in life, he wanted her to be under the control of him. He likes her spending time in the beauty parlour or at the tailor's shop or at shopping. But if it comes to her spending time somewhere where her intellectual talents are concerned, he laid an end to all her campaign.

She stomped off the room door and in the evening she uttered that she was going to meet his uncle and said

I hope that is not going to undermine your standing in the society. Is there anything I can do that won't? I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same. Then I wanted to start a crèche and you said you didn't want the house filled with babies. So I thought I would find something else to do which didn't involve making money, but even that isn't right. Don't I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife. Your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfill your sexual needs and with no rights. (Nair *Mistress*: 73)

Shyam's idea of marriage is to keep a pretty wife, indulge in her wishful fancies and make her reliant on him. He does not want a confident woman as a wife. Radha and Shyam are mismatched in many ways and she feels suffocated in her marriage. She compares herself to the butterfly she wrapped up and stuck to a board as part of biology assignments in school and feels that her heart aches to fly somewhere departing from her husband. Shyam's nature symbolizes the typical, Indian governing and trying to rule over every aspect of his wife's life.

Radha is emotionally detached and fairly disdainful of her husband, Shyam. Their matrimony existed only in name, without any effort on the part of Radha to keep it lively. She was unable to create a bond with him and considered that her marriage was already “fractured” as she mentioned to Chris. It is the beginning to enjoy her life and first step indirectly to voice out her travail. An affair can add excitement and a sense of purpose to life, and often this activity helps to taste up the state of achieving autonomy, from the hands of the dominating partner. Boredom and anger are the common reasons why Radha had an affair with Chris. Sometimes anger at a husband may cause an affair to start, especially when the spouse is being difficult and someone else is being nice and pleasant. Due to this various assaults she hated her husband and starts to seek pleasure from Chris. On another occasion she was shocked to find out that Shyam has been maintaining a record of her periods in the calendar.

Radha’s attitude towards Chris builds a new moral code of extramarital relationship. Like all the ordinary husbands Shyam monitors her behaviour through his staff and even at times tried to control her but he was not successful in those attempts. Finally, Shyam knows that he cannot reign over Radha’s mind and hence decides to reign over her body. When a woman is indifferent to his husband and turns to another man for love or sex, it directly questions the virility of the husband. In this case, Shyam needed to reassert his ownership of Radha and ‘mark his territory’. He wanted to prove that he is the husband and he has complete rights to his wife’s body whether she welcomed the intrusion or not. The very description of the act in the novel shows Shyam with an almost animal like drive to his virility and asserts his position as the husband. His one act of rape leaves a deep scar on Radha whereas, he is quite satisfied with what he has done without a scrap of guilt.

Radha, on her way to home, she went to meet Chris at the cottage and there Radha took up the place of cello in Chris. Many times, when these women are left alone by husbands under precarious predicaments, these women do not hesitate in developing extramarital relationship with persons who show sincere affection they thrive for or sometimes for their personal achievements. Here Nair’s woman, Radha appears as a split subject who watch her being watched by men but generate the strength to attain freedom from the patriarchal society by living a life of their own choice through revolt. The woman’s quest for recognition is satiated when she takes a lover and rejects her husband. The author seems to think it absolutely correct that such

selfish husbands deserve such treatment from their wives. Radha has no malice against her husband Shyam for his past activities towards her. In fact, she thanks him as it was his heart that made her become an independent woman and thus have her choice in life and succeeded in her identity. She also stated that not only she succeeded in her hunt but also in her independence, rather than left behind contented with that of a typical wife.

Narayan's women characters grow stronger and show that the coming out of the 'New Woman' is not a myth or a utopia in India. However, this "New Woman" is mainly prejudiced by the West and articulates their resistance against domineering elements of Indian culture by using the value of the West as resources. She struggles for freedom, asserts equality and searches for identity. Narayan's "New Woman" might not have brought earth-shaking changes to India, yet she has certainly brought positive changes not only in her man but also in Indian society. Though R. K. Narayan is a traditionalist, he is undoubtedly aware of the oppressive elements of Indian traditional culture, which is quite different from the findings of many other Indian experts who attribute all the sufferings of subalterns to colonial rule and western culture. And further from his depiction we can also see that in his understanding the modernization of India not only means the reexamination of colonial rule and its leftover but also the re-examination of their own tradition which is cherished by the nationalists. Anita Nair's women characters do not frequently take such a severe step. Here Radha becomes known as the strongest self, though the strength was born out of interruption and lack of expectation. This character has at last liberated her from all the restrictions of marriage, the 'honourable bondage' that she was handling with her husband for a long period. The man in the story that is Shyam appears as the most disgraceful character, living with his wife's assets and at the same time torments her in the name of marriage.

Works Cited:

1. Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. Print.
2. Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London: Arnold, 1977. Print.
3. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Twice Born Fiction*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971. Print.
4. Naik, M.K. *The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K.Narayan*, New Delhi: Sterling

- Publishers Pvt.Ltd., 1983. Print.
5. Nair, Anita. *Mistress*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.
 6. Narayan, R.K. *The Dark Room*, Chennai: Indian Thoughts Publications, 2005. Print.
 7. Nubile, Clara. *The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2002. Print.
 8. Singh, Sushila. "Recent Trends in Feminist Thought," *Indian Women Novelists*, New Delhi: Prestige, 1991. Print.